

# **Characteristics of Japanese TV advertising**

— A review of the theoretical and empirical evidence —

Carolus L. C. Praet

In this paper we explore the characteristics of Japanese TV advertising.

In the first section we review the literature to identify the characteristics of Japanese advertising that are most often mentioned by both foreign and Japanese commentators. The 'soft selling' nature was found to be the most commonly used description of Japanese advertising.

The term 'soft sell' in turn can be divided into a number of sub-characteristics. In the second section we review these sub-characteristics and the theoretical explanations given for them, while adding some observations of our own.

In the third section we then review the empirical literature concerning Japanese TV advertising.

Finally, we discuss some limitations of the existing body of empirical literature and make suggestions for future research.

## **1 Characteristics of Japanese Advertising**

In order to define the characteristics of Japanese advertising it is instructive to start with a review of the most commonly used descriptions of Japanese advertising by researchers, journalists, and other observers. Although these descriptions are usually based on personal observations by the authors, rather than on empirical data, they can be considered indicative of the characteristics of Japanese advertising.

## 1 'Soft sell', 'Image', and 'Mood'

One of the most frequently used descriptions for Japanese advertising is the term 'soft sell', as opposed to the 'hard sell'<sup>1)</sup> approach that is common in the US (Mueller, 1987; Mueller, 1992; Tanaka, 1993; Johansson, 1994; Nariu and Yamamoto, 1994; Herbig, 1995; Johansson and Nonaka, 1996; East Asian Executive Reports, 1996; de Mooij, 1998).

Mueller (1992) provides the following definition of 'soft sell' and 'hard sell':

Soft Sell : (T)he primary emphasis is on creating a mood or an atmosphere rather than on highlighting the product and its features. This may be achieved through the use of a beautiful scene or the development of an emotional story or verse. Human emotional sentiments are emphasized over clear-cut, product-related appeals. The tone is low key and the communication style tends to be more suggestive than direct.

Hard Sell : (T)he primary emphasis is on distinguishing the product from the competition. Comparisons, either of a particular criterion or the product in general, are common. Explicit comparisons may mention the competition by name. Implicit comparisons, with statements such as "number one" and "leader," also signal a hard-sell approach. The tone is high key and the communication style is aggressive.

The words 'image', 'mood', 'emotional' and 'sentimental' are used to refer to the 'soft sell' nature of Japanese advertising (Kilburn, 1987b; The Economist, 1993; Johansson and Nonaka, 1996; Di Benedetto *et al.*, 1992).

Sei's (1990) description of Japanese advertising can be considered representative :

---

1) In Japan, the term 'soft sell' is called *teian-gata*, 'hard sell' is known as *settoku-gata* (Nariu and Yamamoto, 1994).

Another characteristic of Japanese CMs is that, unlike the demonstrative argumentation of adverts in the U. S. (...) here the appeal is more sentimental. Instead of saying this is what's good about the product, the approach is to create an engaging mood-image.

An article in *East Asian Executive Reports* (1996) describes Japanese advertising as follows :

For the most part Japanese advertising has been "soft-sell," relying on the use of celebrities, attractive graphics, music or catchy slogans to sell products. A "hard-sell" approach, using analytical logic, product comparison, or "annoy and attract attention" tactics, is not as common.

The author of the above article mentions the use of celebrities, attractive graphics, music and catchy slogans as concrete examples or sub-characteristics of the Japanese soft sell approach to advertising.

Other descriptions of Japanese advertising mention the use of short commercials (Herbig, 1995), the importance of corporate identification and image (Imanishi, 1994; Tanaka, 1993; Herbig, 1995), and the appearance of foreigners and foreign celebrities (Fields, 1989a, b; Herbig, 1995; Matsui, 1996; Yamaguchi, 1997). These characteristics can also be considered as part of the soft sell style of advertising.

There thus appears to be a general consensus among both Japanese and Western authors that, whereas Western (= American) advertising usually stresses the attributes and function of the product in a rational, direct, and logical way, Japanese advertising generally uses suggestive and indirect appeals<sup>2)</sup>.

Whereas most commentators of the Japanese advertising scene have

---

2) Moeran (1996), in his seminal anthropological account of the work of a large Japanese advertising agency, recounts of a creative team working on a certain account arguing that "advertising is neither rational nor logical".

been stressing its soft selling nature, others have argued that this does not mean that all Japanese advertising is characterized by a soft sell approach (Fields, 1989a).

Johansson (1994) has pointed out that more recent Japanese TV commercials have featured a hard sell approach, especially in the frequently purchased consumer goods (detergents, soap, and shampoo), computer and soft drink product categories.

The reason for the more hard selling approach mentioned by Johansson may be found in the fact that in the category of detergents, shampoos and soaps, one of the main players in the market is Procter & Gamble. Procter & Gamble tends to use a worldwide, standardized approach in terms of advertising format. Examples of this are comparative advertising, product benefit demonstrations, and testimonials. Procter & Gamble tends to be market leader –although not in Japan– and has set a world standard for advertising in the product categories in which it competes. Local competitors have tended to imitate the Procter & Gamble advertising style, which is also the case in Japan with Kao and Lion ‘bench marking’ Procter & Gamble. The computer and soft drink product categories are also global industries in which American companies tend to be market leaders. Moreover, these product categories tend to be considered to be more appropriate for using a standardized advertising approach, usually an American-style approach.

Nevertheless, the generally accepted view of Japanese advertising seems to be that it tends to be characterized by a soft sell rather than a hard sell approach.

## **2 Explanations for the soft selling nature of Japanese advertising**

Several explanations for the soft selling nature of Japanese advertising have been proposed. Below we shall give an overview of the most important explanations. The explanations have been arranged according to a number of sub-characteristics that together form the advertising style known as 'soft sell'.

### **Characteristic 1 : Little information concerning product attributes**

#### **1 High-context communication**

Explanations for the soft selling nature of Japanese advertising as opposed to the hard selling nature of American advertising are often cultural in orientation. One cultural explanation is based on the constructs of low-context and high-context communication as proposed by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who has divided cultures into those that use low-context communication styles and those that use high-context communication styles (Hall, 1976). Communication styles in high-context cultures emphasize interpersonal relationships, physical setting, social circumstances, shared knowledge, and non-verbal and body language. Communication styles in low-context cultures stress verbal language: unambiguous spoken or written messages. In low-context cultures, meaning has to be transmitted explicitly and verbally to be understood.

Japan is an example of a high-context culture, whereas the United States –and most western countries– are low-context cultures. This difference in communication style is also found in the respective advertising styles of both countries, translating into a soft sell (= high-context) approach to advertising in Japan and a hard sell (= low-context) approach to advertising in the United States.

Consequently, for people from a low-context culture, Japanese advertising often seems to be nonsensical, non-logical (Johansson, 1994; Johansson and Nonaka, 1996) or 'irrelevant' (Tanaka, 1993). For most westerners from low-context cultures, much of Japanese advertising is not recognizable as advertising, since it appears to be unconnected to the nature of the product that is advertised (Sei, 1990), at least until the end of the commercial.

Therefore, the assertion that most Japanese advertising is illogical, unrecognizable as advertising or even irrelevant is a culturally biased one. Most westerners simply lack the contextual, cultural knowledge that Japanese consumers have of Japanese society, companies, brands, advertising history, cultural symbols, sports stars, entertainers, actors, singers and the like, which is shared by most Japanese and is referred to as *joshiki* (common knowledge). Once a westerner has been living in Japan for a prolonged period of time, has mastered the language and has acquired this *joshiki*, most Japanese advertisements no longer appear to be enigmatic.

## 2 Emphasis on in-store information

Another explanation for the soft-selling nature of Japanese advertising argues that in Japan the emphasis tends to be on in-store information (Johansson, 1994). In Japan, the real learning about products allegedly does not occur until the consumer goes to the retail store. Japanese consumers tend to obtain information by going to the many retail stores and comparing the actual products before making decisions about what brand to purchase (Nariu and Yamamoto, 1994). Tanaka (1993) reports empirical data showing that Japanese consumers tend to be in-store decision-makers. Consumer in-store decision making ranged from 69.6 percent for liquor stores to 96.5 percent for large supermarkets.

In contrast with the situation in America where shops tend to be

located far from residential areas, in Japan there are many stores within a 1-kilometer range from where the consumer lives (Nariu and Yamamoto, 1994), making it easier to obtain information about products at the retail store level. Empirical research comparing shopping habits of American and Japanese housewives has shown that Japanese housewives shop much more frequently than their American counterparts (Tanaka, 1993), thus increasing their exposure to in-store information and promotion.

In addition, manufacturers often keep so-called missionary salesmen in the bigger stores to help demonstrate, explain and sell their product lines (Johansson, 1994). In general these factors would explain why Japanese advertisers have less need for mentioning product attributes in advertising, why it is sufficient for advertisers to use image advertising in order to make people visit retail stores, and why in many cases short 15-second messages suffice (Nariu and Yamamoto, 1994).

However, with the increasing popularity of discount stores featuring mainly part-time employees who often do not know much about the products on sale, the need for more informative advertising might also increase. These big-size sub-urban discount stores have started to replace the many traditional mom-and-pop stores located in residential areas. These discount stores usually can only be reached by car and this is starting to change Japanese traditional shopping habits, making them more similar to those of American consumers. In addition, the fact that more and more women have joined the work force has also caused a change in shopping habits. These changes may make the in-store information argument to explain the lack of product information in advertising lose its validity.

### 3 Feel-do-learn hierarchy of advertising effects: importance of likeability and topicality

Miracle (1987) has suggested that the hierarchy of advertising effects has a different order in Japan than in the US. According to this author, the hierarchy of advertising effects in Japan has the following sequence: feel-do-learn. The consumer sees a commercial, likes it (feel), goes to the store and buys the product (do) and then finds out about the product by using it (learn). This contrasts with the general assumption in America and Europe that for the western consumer the sequence of advertising effects tends to start with cognitive processing (learn), followed by a conative reaction (do) and finally an affective reaction (feel). In Japan this sequence thus is said not to start with cognitive but with affective processing of the advertisement (Herbig, 1995).

#### Likeability

Indeed, in Japan the three necessary ingredients for a good commercial are said to be its ability to establish empathy (*kyokan*), likeability (*kokan*), and a feeling of intimacy (*shinkinkan*) on the part of the viewer (Matsui, 1996). Cognitive learning about the product does not seem to be an important goal. 'Advertising liking' is said to play an important role among Japanese consumers (de Mooij, 1998) who transfer the affect toward advertising to the advertised product (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992). In fact, empirical research in Japan has shown that there is a very strong correlation (0.93) between a commercial's likeability score and a consumer's purchase intention (Yamaki, 1996). Over the years, advertisers' experience in combination with empirical research findings have strengthened the view held by most advertisers and advertising agencies that Japanese consumers need to be approached through likeable advertising.

### Topicality

More than getting information about product attributes and trying to persuade the consumer into buying the product, it is important for a commercial to be talked about by consumers. In Japan, 'topicality' (Moeran, 1996; Dentsu, 1998) or *wadasei* is considered to be an important function of advertising. The ACC<sup>3)</sup> concurs –the Japanese equivalent of the advertising festival in Cannes– even has the so-called *wadaisho* or 'prize for most talked about commercial of the year'. It has been pointed out however, that topicality does not necessarily lead to higher sales (Matsuoka, 1996).

Thus the American view of advertising as persuasive communication does not appear to be shared by Japanese advertisers who try to appease consumers through advertising that scores high on likeability (soft sell) rather than annoy them with persuasive argumentation tactics (hard sell).

### 4 Difference in product categories advertised

Nariu and Yamamoto (1994), have pointed out that Japanese TV advertising tends to feature more commercials for convenience goods than American advertising (64.9% vs. 44.8%<sup>4)</sup>). Convenience goods tend to feature less information concerning product attributes than shopping goods as a result of a lower perceived risk on the part of consumers. The different ratio of advertising for convenience goods between Japan and America then, results in less product attribute-related appeals in Japanese advertising (Nariu and Yamamoto, 1994).

---

3) The All-Japan Commercial Broadcasting Council

4) Calculated on basis of research data by Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992

## **Characteristic 2 : Little comparative advertising**

Several explanations for the virtual lack of comparative advertising in Japan have been suggested. The most important explanations are discussed below.

### **1 Cultural tendency to avoid conflict and preserve harmony**

The lack of comparative advertising, a common form of advertising in America, in Japan has been explained by some observers as resulting from the cultural tendency among Japanese –and consequently among Japanese advertisers– to avoid conflict and seek harmony (Tanaka, 1993; Herbig, 1995). The influence of Confucianism, which stresses the importance of reciprocity and harmony, is considered to be influencing the approach to doing business in general and consequently also the philosophy of advertising in particular. It is culturally not acceptable and in bad taste to say denigrating things about one's competitor (Kilburn, 1987a; Herbig, 1995; de Mooij, 1998), or to even suggest that one's own product is superior to the competitor's product. Whereas the Japan Fair Trade Commission (FTC) in fact has allowed use of comparative advertising since 1986, it has at the same time established some guidelines to ensure comparisons would be fair and based on accurate facts, preferably obtained from independent research bodies (Kilburn, 1987a). In addition to the existence of FTC guidelines concerning comparative advertising some industries have self-imposed regulations concerning advertising. Moeran (1996) gives as an example the self-imposed industry regulations concerning advertising in the medical product category in Japan. Some of these regulations prohibit manufacturers from making statements regarding the superlative quality of their products and explicitly forbid the use of such words as 'absolutely', 'most,' or 'the best ... in Japan/the world' (Moeran, 1996). When comparative advertising is used however, it generally tends to be indirect, often in the form of comparing a new, improved product with the company's older version of the same product, or comparing one's prod-

uct with a non-specified competitor's product. Recently however, Toyota has used a comparative newspaper advertisement in which it directly compared its car with rivals BMW and Mercedes, listing the features of the three cars and claiming a superior price/performance compared to the competing brands. This approach however, is rather the exception than the rule. Pepsi has also used the comparative advertising format in Japan, which was quickly withdrawn after Coca-Cola filed a protest claiming violation of trademark rights. Recently, some Japanese companies in the telecommunications industry have been using an indirect comparative approach in their advertising campaigns, which can be considered to be culturally more acceptable than the use of direct comparison.

## **2 Equality of features and functionality among competing products and the practice of corporate branding**

One other explanation for the lack of comparative advertising is that products in the Japanese market tend to be equal in terms of features and functionality, and that therefore unique selling propositions (USP) don't make much sense, since there is nothing unique about most competing products in the market. And even if there is something unique about the product, then the Japanese business practices of bench marking and re-engineering tend to make unique product features very short-lived, since they are quickly imitated and even improved upon by the competition (Johansson and Nonaka, 1996).

Nariu and Yamamoto (1994) explain the lack of salient functional differences among products by referring to the homogeneity of Japanese consumers resulting in roughly similar product wants and needs.

In addition, Matsuoka (1996) has pointed out and criticized the alleged habit of Japanese advertising agencies to differentiate among competing prod-

ucts on basis of advertising execution, even if the product itself possesses differentiating functional attributes.

In this context, Moeran (1996) quotes data about perceived 'brand parity' -the fact that consumers can not distinguish between different brands on the market- by consumers in different countries in the world. Perceptions of brand parity by Japanese consumers are the highest in the world at 95%, whereas in the US consumer perceptions of brand parity lie somewhere between 60 and 70%<sup>5)</sup>. Whether the high score for perceived brand parity among Japanese consumers is a result of an actual lack of functional differences among products or merely a result of a lack of advertising stressing functional differences is not clear. In fact, the high score on perceived brand parity for Japan may be a result of the Japanese practice of using corporate branding as opposed to product branding (Tanaka, 1993). Several authors have pointed out the importance of corporate branding in Japan (Imanishi, 1994; Tanaka, 1993).

An important consequence of the practice of corporate branding for advertising style is that it becomes more important to stress the corporate image rather than product attributes. It has been pointed out that corporate images are difficult to compare, thus leading to less comparative advertising (Nariu and Yamamoto, 1994).

---

5) Moeran appears to treat the term 'brand' as equal to the term 'product'. The data about 'brand parity' quoted by Moeran thus may actually be nothing more than a reflection of the difference in brand management between Japan and America. When Japanese consumers are asked about 'brands' they will generally interpret this as meaning 'corporate brands', whereas American consumers will interpret the term to mean 'product brands'. It was not clear however, whether the questions in Japan were phrased in terms of 'product parity' or 'brand parity'.

### **3 'Split-account' system and absence of rules against competing accounts**

One more reason for the lack of comparative advertising is said to be a result of the so-called 'split-account' system in the Japanese advertising world (Moeran, 1996). This refers to the practice by Japanese advertisers to divide their accounts across several agencies. As a result, Japanese advertising agencies can work for clients that are competing in the same industry (Johansson, 1994). Japanese clients are said generally not to mind about this (Economist, 1993b), although it has also been reported that increasing competition in Japan has made some clients reluctant to share their advertising agencies with bitter rivals (Economist, 1993a). A result of this practice is that when colleagues of the same advertising agency are working on accounts for rivaling companies they will be reluctant to attack each other's clients through comparative advertising.

In addition, the Japanese advertising industry is of an oligopolistic nature with Dentsu and Hakuhodo controlling most of the commercial time on television. Even rivaling companies will be forced to deal with Dentsu and Hakuhodo if they want their advertising broadcast on television. This is said to result in a lack of comparative advertising even among rivals. As for the example of the comparative advertising by Pepsi, the Pepsi account was handled by Dentsu, whereas the Coca-Cola account was handled by Hakuhodo, making comparative advertising possible (Nariu and Yamamoto, 1994).

### **Characteristic 3 : Celebrity advertising**

Perhaps one of the most salient characteristics of Japanese advertising is its reliance on celebrities. It is considered one of the typical elements characterizing the soft sell style of advertising.

Celebrities in advertising generally include famous people from the

world of sports, movies, art, music, gourmet cuisine, and media. Also the frequent appearance in Japanese advertising by foreign celebrities and stars from the world of entertainment (film, sports, fashion, and music scene) is a distinctive feature (Fannin, 1996; Fields, 1989a, b; Herbig, 1995; Matsui, 1996; Yamaguchi, 1997).

Celebrity appearances in Japanese advertising however, are not limited to famous actors, singers, sports stars, or comedians. 'Talents' are an important celebrity category that appear in advertising campaigns in large numbers. A large subcategory of these 'talents' is made up of young aspiring models that are scouted in contests or auditions by talent agencies. Many of these young people start their careers by appearing in advertising, where they gain a lot of exposure and become well known and popular among the public. Subsequently, they are cast in popular soap operas, quizzes and other entertainment programs on television while continuing to appear in TV commercials. Hence, the same celebrities and talents often appear both in the TV programs and in the accompanying commercials.

As a result of many fifteen-second commercials on Japanese TV, communication clutter tends to be heavy. Amidst this clutter, one of the best ways of attracting attention to a company's product is thought to be through celebrity endorsement (Moeran, 1996; Sato, 1997).

We have seen above that generating 'topicality' tends to be an important objective of advertising in Japan. Celebrities and 'talents' are typically chosen on basis of their ability to generate 'topicality' (*wadaisei*) (Moeran, 1996). 'Topicality' refers to the fact that people tend to talk about the commercial if a popular 'talent' appears in it. One way of enhancing a campaign's topicality is to combine a popular celebrity with one or more other popular celebrities, a trend which has been increasing in recent years (Matsui, 1996; Sato, 1997). A celebrity or 'talent' is also chosen on basis of the 'impact' (Asa-

hina, 1997; Sato, 1997) she is able to generate. It has been pointed out however, that there are examples of both successful and unsuccessful use of talents and celebrities. In order for celebrity advertising to be successful, there needs to be an appropriate symbolic link between the product concept and the celebrity (Matsuoka, 1996; Sato, 1997).

Another reason for the use of celebrities lies in their ability to differentiate among products. As was referred to above, it is often argued that—especially in Japan—many products no longer possess clear attributes in terms of quality and functionality that could differentiate them from competing products. One of the main merits of using ‘talents’ in commercials is their ability to give the brand a ‘personality’ or ‘face’ (Moeran, 1996; Sato, 1997). However, one problem with the use of talents is that they often appear in advertising for several companies simultaneously, thus confusing the consumer as to what brand was promoted. This would certainly defeat the purpose of product differentiation, the reason for using the talent in the first place. Another problem occurs when the impact of the talent is much stronger than the impact generated by the product, resulting in the consumer only remembering about the talent (Sato, 1997).

#### **Characteristic 4 : importance of the company name and image**

The importance of the corporate image and the identification of the company name and logo in Japanese advertising have been pointed out by several authors (Tanaka, 1993; Imanishi, 1994; Herbig, 1995). Having a good company image among consumers is considered very important in Japan. Most commercials identify the company name and logo at the end of the commercial, presumably to show the consumer that the company is backing up its product, thus communicating a feeling of trust, reliability, and security to the consumer. A favorable corporate image is said to influence consumers’

brand purchase intention (Tanaka, 1993). The importance of corporate image is one explanation for the practice of corporate branding, referred to above. Corporate branding in Japan is said to be more important than in the western world, where most companies carry product brands and do not identify the company behind the brand. Thus the importance of a positive corporate image will influence advertising style, leading advertisers to use a soft sell approach, rather than a hard sell approach.

#### **Characteristic 5 : use of songs**

One of the characteristics of Japanese TV advertising that sets it apart from American advertising and that is considered an element of the soft sell approach, is the use of songs as theme songs in many advertising campaigns. TV commercials in fact often function as a vehicle to promote new pop songs, through tie-ups with popular artists from the world of Japanese pop music. The benefit for the artists and record companies is that they receive free airplay through the fact that the 15-second commercials are shown frequently on TV stations. Japanese consumers typically hear the latest songs by their favorite artists or hear a catchy song by a new artist in a TV commercial and start looking for these songs in the karaoke boxes to sing with their friends or buy the CD at the local record store. According to data for 1997, of the 23 songs that reached overall sales of more than 1 million CDs, 7 had featured as commercial songs (CM Now, 1998). The benefit for advertisers is that the use of music by popular artists in commercials will create goodwill among the many fans of these bands and artists, which they hope will rub off positively onto the product advertised. Often the artists or 'talents' who sing the advertising theme songs also appear as the main characters of the advertisement, thus assuring attention from the fans, who typically are the target group of the commercial. In Japan, music

marketing and product marketing go hand in hand.

Songs are generally used to create a positive and soft image and as a logical result, the use of a song usually precludes an argumentative approach.

### **3 Japanese TV advertising in empirical studies**

Having had a look at descriptions of Japanese TV advertising in both the academic and non-academic literature, it is now necessary to look at the results of empirical studies of Japanese TV advertising. Is the picture of Japanese TV advertising as painted on the basis of qualitative observations upheld by empirical data?

#### **Characteristics of Japanese TV advertising as compared to US TV advertising**

A total of 6 empirical studies in the English-language academic literature comparing Japanese with US TV advertising were used for reference. The results will be arranged into the following four classification categories:

- I Strategy: informative or affective;
- II Form and Execution: this refers to stylistic techniques and executional formats that package the advertising appeal or message into a concrete form in order to present it to the audience;
- III Type of people, human relationships, gender roles, and cultural values;
- IV Length of commercial, measured in seconds.

**I Strategy: informative or affective****a) Informational versus Transformational Strategy<sup>6)</sup>**

- No significant difference in overall strategy found in both countries;
- Both countries use transformational strategy more often than informational strategy;
- No difference in transformational strategies in both countries;
- Largest difference is in the use and format of informational strategies;
- In Japan even informational ads tend to include a transformational appeal;
- In Japan executions of informational commercials tend to be rather emotional in nature. (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992)

**b) Use of product information cues**

Japanese TV advertising (as compared to US advertising) :

- Is less informative, though still relatively informative (Lin 1993);
- Uses a higher overall number of informational cues (Lin and Salwen, 1995), but
- Uses a smaller variety of informational cues in less product categories (Lin and Salwen, 1995),

---

6) Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1992) use the following typology distinguishing informational and transformational advertising: "Informational advertising presents factual information; the ad should have data which the consumer accepts as being verifiable. Transformational advertising is affect-based and endows the use of the brand with a particular positive experience." They then classify this typology into specific strategies. Informational strategies can be divided into a) hyperbole (an exaggerated statement that has the general appearance of being factually based, but is not so), b) preemptive, c) USP, and d) comparative; Transformational strategies are divided into a) brand image, b) user image, and c) use occasion.

- Uses more emotional and subjective informational cues such as packaging (Lin, 1993; Lin and Salwen, 1995), taste, new ideas, and company sponsored results (Lin and Salwen, 1995), and availability cues (Lin, 1993);
- Avoids presenting claims with heavy rational or tangible appeal such as guarantees / warranties, quality, performance, safety, nutrition, special offers, price<sup>7)</sup> (Lin, 1993; Lin and Salwen, 1995), independent test results, product performance (Belk and Bryce, 1986; Lin, 1993; Lin and Salwen, 1995), ingredients or components (Belk and Bryce, 1986; Lin, 1993)

## II Form and Execution

Japanese TV advertising (as compared to US advertising)

- Uses less comparison (Belk and Bryce, 1986; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992; Lin, 1993);
- Uses less hyperbole and superlatives (Belk and Bryce, 1986 ; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992);
- Uses less testimonials (Lin, 1993);
- Uses more USP<sup>8)</sup> and preemptive<sup>9)</sup> strategies (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992)

---

7) The study by Belk and Bryce (1986) contradicts the findings of the Lin (1993) and Lin and Salwen (1995) studies, as the former study found that Japanese ads tend to stress price more than US ads do. The difference in findings may be caused either by time lag or sampling error.

8) The study by Belk and Bryce (1986) found that Japanese ads do not tend to stress brand uniqueness, thus contradicting the Ramaprasad and Hasegawa (1992) findings. The difference in findings may be caused either by time lag or sampling error.

9) USP stands for 'Unique Selling Proposition' and refers to "The unique benefit claimed for an advertised product or service" (The Dictionary of Advertising, 1986); A preemptive strategy refers to an advertisement that "has an objectively verifiable fact (s), but the fact (s) is not the basis for comparison nor is it pointed out as being unique" (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992)

- Uses more product demonstrations (Belk and Bryce, 1986);
- Uses shorter messages than US ads (Lin, 1993);
- Uses songs (instead of only music, which is more often the case in US advertising) to set moods (Lin, 1993);
- Uses more female voice-over (Lin, 1993 ; Sengupta, 1995);
- Uses less male voice-over (Sengupta, 1995);
- Uses less voice-over throughout the ad (Belk and Bryce, 1986);
- Uses more lecture style for direct sales messages (instead of talking heads, which is a technique more often used in the US) (Lin, 1993);
- Uses more still graphics (compared to more animation in US) (Lin, 1993);
- Uses less the slice-of-life format than US advertising (Lin, 1993);
- Uses less humor than US advertising (Lin, 1993);
- Uses superimposed writing more frequently (Belk and Bryce, 1986);
- Company name or logo tends to be identified in 94% of commercials as compared to 56% of US commercials, tends to be shown more towards the end of commercials in Japan, but appears for a shorter time than in the US (Miracle et al, 1992);
- Brand name tends to be identified later in the commercial and appears for a shorter time on screen than in US (Miracle et al, 1992);
- The product or package tends to be shown later on in 30-second commercials, but is shown longer throughout the commercial for both 15- and 30- second commercials (Miracle et al, 1992).

### III Type of people, human relationships, gender roles, and cultural values

#### Japanese advertising

- Uses high status spokespersons more often (Belk and Bryce, 1986);
- Uses more celebrities, and those celebrities tend to be male rather than female celebrities; US ads tend to use fewer male celebrities (Lin, 1993);
- Uses more often female announcers and sexy female models (Belk and Bryce, 1986);
- Shows stronger role differentiation between men and women:
  - Women are shown less often in working roles than in US;
  - Women are shown more often in decorative role than in US;
  - Women are more often shown cooking, cleaning, and spending time in personal beautification than women in US;
  - Japanese men are shown relaxing at home more often than women, and much more so than is the case in the US;
  - Japanese women are shown often cleaning, taking care of the children and being involved in personal beautification, and much more so than is the case in the US (Sengupta, 1995);
- Features less often depictions of family (Belk and Bryce, 1986);
- Less often shows people touching (Belk and Bryce, 1986);
- Uses materialistic themes more often (Belk and Bryce, 1986);
- Uses individualistic appeals like 'unique' and 'successful' less often (Belk and Bryce, 1986).

#### IV Length of commercial<sup>10)</sup>

Three empirical cross-cultural studies comparing Japanese and US TV advertising were reviewed for length of commercials. The results are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1 Length of television advertisements in Japan and US

Percentage of 15-second commercials	
Japan : 68% (Belk and Bryce, 1986) ;	US : 10% (Belk and Bryce, 1986) ;
65% (Miracle et al, 1992) ;	30% (Miracle et al, 1992);
63.6% (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992)	31.6% (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992)
Percentage of 30-second commercials	
Japan : 32% (Belk and Bryce, 1986) ;	US : 90% (Belk and Bryce, 1986) ;
34% (Miracle et al, 1992) ;	62% (Miracle et al, 1992) ;
36.4% (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992)	68.4% (Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992)

The majority of Japanese commercials tend to be short 15-second messages, whereas the majority of American commercials tend to be 30 seconds long. The impression of Japanese advertising as mainly consisting of short commercials is thus empirically validated.

#### Conclusion

The notion of Japanese advertising as soft sell is generally confirmed by empirical studies.

10) Total sample sizes for the respective studies were 203 (US) and 191(Japan) for the Belk and Bryce study; 1228 (US) and 1253 (Japan) for the Miracle *et al* study; 311 (US) and 373 (Japan) for the Ramaprasad and Hasegawa study. It is therefore to be expected that the figures mentioned by Miracle *et al* will reflect the actual state of affairs more closely.

When informativeness of advertising is taken as a criterion, the notion that Japanese advertising tends to be soft sell is generally supported<sup>11)</sup>. However, it appears that Japanese advertising can not be called non-informative. There tends to be a qualitative difference rather than a quantitative difference in information between the two countries. Japanese TV advertising differs from American TV advertising regarding the nature of the information provided, the focus of information tends to be on different kinds of information cues, stressing subjective claims, packaging, and availability claims, whereas American advertising tends to stress more the rational, tangible, and objective claims. Informational advertising tends to be accompanied by a transformational appeal, thus softening the message.

The notion that Japanese advertising tends to avoid using comparative advertising and superiority claims is supported by empirical research.

The relative importance placed on the company name, logo and image is also supported by empirical research findings.

The claim that Japanese advertising heavily relies on celebrities is confirmed.

The impression of Japanese advertising as mainly consisting of short commercials is also empirically validated.

As far as cultural values and themes are concerned, generally no specific references are made in descriptions of Japanese advertising, presumably because they are less easy to detect. Cultural values and themes however, can be considered important factors in marketing communications. Consumers generally do not notice the underlying cultural values belonging to

---

11) Tanaka (1993) reports results of a study conducted by Hasegawa that compared American and Japanese TV advertisements. This study found that Japanese advertisements used significantly more soft sell appeals and that American advertisements tended to have significantly more hard sell appeals.

their culture. They will however, notice when advertising is using themes and depictions of human relationships that run counter to the central values of the culture of the consumer.

An interesting finding is the strong role differentiation between men and women in Japanese advertising. De Mooij (1998) has suggested that strong role differentiation between men and women is related to the extent to which a culture embraces masculine values. Hofstede's (1984, 1991) cross-cultural research concerning work-related values found that Japan had the highest score on the masculinity dimension of all the countries surveyed. It will be interesting to empirically validate the relationship between a country's score on Hofstede's masculinity dimension and the depiction of gender roles in advertising.

#### **4 General limitations concerning comparative advertising studies including Japan and suggestions for future research.**

##### **Limitations**

A number of limitations concerning empirical advertising studies that include Japan must be pointed out.

Firstly, more than half of comparative advertising studies (also those that cover Japan) tend to use magazine advertising as sample for the study. Fewer empirical studies focus on TV advertising (cf. Samiee and Jeong, 1994).

Secondly, comparisons tend to be almost exclusively made with US TV advertising by American researchers, or researchers that have received their academic training (or part of it) in the US.

Thirdly, as a result of the second point, advertising typologies of creative strategy, criteria for content analysis, and other concepts used in empirical

studies tend to be developed in the US and are not necessarily appropriate for application to non-US advertising (cf. Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992). Many studies tend to focus on the information content of advertising, since this is considered one of the most important criteria for advertising in the US. The nature and function of advertising as seen appropriate in the US tends to bias the way researchers approach non-US advertising as well. In the US effective advertising is considered to be informative and persuasive, whereas this is not necessarily the case in other cultures (de Mooij, 1998).

This is why many of the studies in cross-cultural advertising research which use content analysis compare information content in advertising among countries<sup>12)</sup>. In order to operationalize the distinction between informative and non-informative the typology developed by Resnik and Stern (1977) or an adaptation of this typology is utilized. This typology is based on the assumption that people make rational decisions when buying, which is a theory of how advertising works that has originated in the US. It does not account for the fact that many buying decisions are affect-based rather than cognitive (de Mooij, 1998). An additional problem is that what is informational for consumers of one culture may not be for consumers of another culture<sup>13)</sup> or may not be necessarily deemed as relevant (Lin and Salwen, 1995).

This focus on information content in advertising fails to account for

---

12) E. g., Madden et al. 1986; Hong et al. 1987; Mueller 1991; Noor Al-Deen 1991; Zandpour et al. 1992; Graham et al. 1993; Lin and Salwen 1995.

13) A study by Chan (1996) found that 8.6 per cent of the Hong Kong Chinese respondents perceived an objectively classified emotional (i. e., not informative) commercial to be "informative", suggesting that the Resnik and Stern (1977) typology of information content does not cover other types of information such as indirect visual cues which may be interpreted as informative by people from a high-context culture (for a definition of this term see elsewhere in this paper) like Hong Kong.

other aspects of messages which may go undetected on basis of the Resnik and Stern typology and which may be more important in explaining how advertising works in other cultures but perhaps also in the US itself.

### **Topics for further research**

What is needed is more cross-cultural advertising research that compares Japanese advertising with advertising of countries other than the US. This will result in a more complete understanding of the characteristics of Japanese advertising as well as advertising in other countries.

This review does not claim to be exhaustive and has not included empirical studies published in Japanese<sup>14)</sup>. As far as the English-language literature on Japanese advertising is concerned however, we suggest it is time to stop 'benchmarking' all advertising on American advertising and to include advertising from multiple countries in empirical studies. There is also a need for theories of advertising that would better fit different cultural realities.

Theories of advertising based on likeability, topicality, and entertainment constructs would seem to fit advertising in Asian and other high-context cultures better than theories of advertising based on the low-context constructs of informativeness and persuasiveness. This also implies that measurements for content analytical studies other than information content would be appropriate. Past studies focussing on cultural themes, depictions of human relationships, and gender roles in advertising are examples of other possible research approaches.

---

14) Two multi-country studies comparing TV advertising by Yamaki (1990, 1996b) exist, but these do not mention reliability and statistical significance data and were therefore not included in our review.

## References

- Asahina, Tomohiko (1997). Tarento-kokoku wa konyu ni musubitsuku ka? [Is there a link between celebrity advertising and sales?] *Brain*, Vol. 37, 4, 30-34.
- Belk, Russell W., and Wendy J. Bryce (1986), "Materialism and Individual Determinism in U.S. and Japanese Print and Television Advertising," in *Advances in Consumer Research Vol XIII*, Richard Lutz, ed., Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 568-572.
- Business Journal, The (1992) "Asian Advertisers Helps Local Firms Enter Japanese Market," San Jose, October 26.
- Dentsu (1998). *Japan 1998 Marketing and Advertising yearbook*. Tokyo: Dentsu Inc.
- DiBenedetto, C. Anthony, Mariko Tamate, and Rajan Chandran, (1992) "Developing Creative Strategy for the Japanese Marketplace." *Journal of Advertising Research*, 32, 1 : 39-48
- Dictionary of Advertising, The (1986). NTC Business Books: Lincolnwood Illinois.
- East Asian Executive Reports (1996) "Advertising in Japan : Tailoring the message as well as the product," Washington, February 15.
- Economist, The (1993a) "Japanese advertising : Don't knock", London, June 26.
- Economist, The, (1993b) "The enigma of Japanese advertising", London, August 14
- Fannin, Brian (1996) "The Americans' commercial appeal: U. S. celebrities omnipresent in Japanese ads", Washington Times, 2nd edition, Washington D. C., April 12.
- Fields, George (1989a). *The Japanese Market Culture*, Second edition, Tokio: The Japan Times, Ltd.
- Fields, George, (1989b), "Fulfilling an Eastern Fantasy-How Western stars from Bronson to McEnroe enchant Japanese viewers and move product," *Advertising Age*, May 8.
- Hall, Edward T., (1976) *Beyond Culture*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.
- Hofstede, Geert (1984), *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Abridged edition. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, Geert (1991). *Cultures and Organizations*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Imanishi, Tetsunosuke (1994). Nihonteki burando-maketingu no yukosei. [The effectiveness of Japanese-style brand marketing.] *Brain*, Vol. 34, 11, 75-80.
- Johansson, Johny K. (1994), "The Sense of 'Nonsense': Japanese Advertising", *Journal of Advertising*, 23, 1, March.
- Johansson, Johny K., and Ikujiro Nonaka. (1996) *Relentless-The Japanese Way of Marketing*. New York: Harper Collins.

- Kaibara, Yukio (1975). *CM wo tsukuru* [Creating commercials]. Tokyo: Dentsu Inc.
- Kilburn, David (1987a) "Comparison ads make first flight in Japan," *Advertising Age*, June 8.
- Kilburn, David (1987b) "Japan's sun rises—Emotional ads gain global support as Japanese avoid Westernization," *Advertising Age*, August 3.
- Lin, Carolyn A. (1993) "Cultural Differences in Message Strategies : A Comparison Between American and Japanese TV Commercials," *Journal of Advertising Research*, 33, 5 : 40-48.
- Lin, Carolyn A., and Michael B. Salwen (1995), "Product Information Strategies of American and Japanese Television Advertisements," *International Journal of Advertising*, 14, 1: 55-64.
- Matsui Mutsumi (1996) Hitto-CM/wadai CM no hyogen-bunseki. Hito mo mono no kawatta ga. kokoku wa kawatta ka. [Analysis of creative features of hit commercials and much talked-about commercials. People and products have changed, but what about advertising?] *Brain*, Vol. 36, 3, 16-26.
- Matsuoka, Shigeo (1996). Sabetsuka no kyoso-senryaku to shite no maketingu-komyunikeshon. [Marketing communication as a competitive differentiation strategy.] *Brain*, Vol. 36, 3, 52-55.
- Miracle, Gordon E. (1987), "Feel-Do-Learn: An Alternative Sequence Underlying Japanese Consumer Response to Television Commercials", in *The Proceedings of the 1987 Conference of the American Academy of Advertising*, ed. Feasley, F. G. 38-45
- Miracle, Gordon E., Charles R. Taylor, and Kyu Yeol Chang (1992), "Culture and Advertising Executions: A Comparison of Selected Characteristics of Japanese and US Television Commercials," *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 4, 4: 89-113.
- Moeran, Brian (1996), *A Japanese Advertising Agency-An Anthropology of Media and Markets*, Honolulu : University of Hawai'i Press
- Mooij, Marieke K. de (1998), *Global Marketing and Advertising-Understanding Cultural Paradoxes*. Sage Publications, USA
- Mueller, Barbara (1987), Reflections of culture: An analysis of Japanese and American advertising appeals," *Journal of Advertising Research*, 27, 3: 51-59.
- Mueller, Barbara (1992), "Standardization vs. Specialization: An Examination of Westernization in Japanese Advertising," *Journal of Advertising Research*, 32, 1: 15-24.
- Nariu, Tatsuhiko, and Julie Yamamoto (1994). Kokoku no NichiBei-hikaku. [A comparison of Japanese and American advertising.] *Nanzan keiei-kenkyu* [Nanzan

- Business Research], *Vol 9, 2*, 623-639.
- Nishimura, Goshu (1991). Nihon no CM wa nani ni koken shite iru no ka. [What are Japanese advertisements contributing to?] *Brain, Vol. 31, 10*, 90-96.
- Nomura, Masaki (1997). Tarento CM zensei-jidai! -Sono mittsu no miryoku to yottsu no fuan. [The golden age of celebrity advertising! Three of its advantages and four of its disadvantages.] *Brain, Vol. 37, 4*, 14-20.
- Ramaprasad, Jyotika, and Kazumi Hasegawa (1992), "Creative Strategies in American and Japanese TV Commercials: A Comparison." *Journal of Advertising Research, 32*, 1: 59-67.
- Sato, Kenji (1997). Ima, naze tarento-kokoku na no ka. [Why is there so much celebrity advertising now?] *Brain, Vol. 37, 4*, 21-25.
- Sei, Keiko (1990), "Japanese CM-A mirror for the 90's," *Kyoto Journal*, No 15, Summer, 31-40.
- Sengupta, Subir (1995), "The Influence of Culture on Portrayals of Women in Television Commercials: A Comparison Between the United States and Japan," *International Journal of Advertising, 14, 4*: 314-333.
- Tanaka, Hiroshi (1993). "Branding in Japan." in *Brand Equity and Advertising: Advertising's Role in Building Strong Brands*. Aaker, David A. and Alexander L. Biel, eds. Hillsdale, HJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Watanabe, Hisanori (1997), Tarento shiko no sei-nendaibetsu henka to shohinzo-kusei [Product attributes and changes in celebrity preferences by gender and generation] *Brain, Vol. 37, 4*, 26-29.
- Yamaguchi, Mari (1997), "Second-Job Stars: some of America's biggest celebrities do commercials in Japan, assured U. S. won't see them." Orange County Register, morning edition, Santa Ana, July 29.
- Yamaki, Toshio (1990). Kokoku kokusai hikaku to gurobaru senryaku. [International comparison of advertising and global strategies]. Tokyo: Sanno Daigaku Shuppan-bu.
- Yamaki, Toshio (1996a). Towareru kokoku no johokachi: kajo-johojidai no kokoku koka. [The need for information value in advertising: Advertising effect in an era of communication overload.] *Brain, Vol. 36, 3*, 43-47.
- Yamaki, Toshio (1996b). Hikaku - Sekai no terebi CM. [Comparison of world TV advertising.] Tokyo: Nikkei kokoku kenkyujo.